Chapter 2

It Takes a Well-Organized Village: Implementing RTI/MTSS Models in Secondary Schools

Susan G. Porter
National University, USA

ABSTRACT

Response to intervention (RTI) and multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) are educational initiatives designed to increase the success of all students in general education and reduce the number of students referred for special education services. RTI and MTSS have resulted in improved outcomes for students. Successful implementation of RTI and MTSS relies upon collaboration between teachers and other school personnel. Lack of collaboration and consistency between members of MTSS teams can compromise the fidelity of the interventions, which can lead to poor student outcomes. Secondary RTI and MTSS models are difficult to implement due to several factors, including student diversity, curriculum complexity, and high student-staff ratios. This chapter investigates recent research on the implementation of RTI and MTSS models in secondary schools and focuses on the interdisciplinary efforts required to implement these models with fidelity and with student success.

INTRODUCTION

Response to Intervention (RTI) is an educational reform designed to reduce the numbers of students identified and referred for special education services. RTI is considered an important general education initiative that will improve instruction and achievement for students in general and in special education settings. Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS), which evolved from RTI, is designed to support all students—both academically and behaviorally—so that they can succeed in school. The success of RTI and MTSS depends on a unified approach to assessment and instruction that is supported by administration at the school and district level.

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MTSS is supported at the federal level. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (2004) specifically advocates for the use of RTI models for assessing and identifying students with mild disabilities. Educational advocacy panels and national organizations have also acknowledged RTI as a major general and special education initiative (National Association of State Directors of Special Education, 2006; National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities, 2005). All 50 states have incorporated RTI into their State Development Plans, and most states have adopted a state RTI framework. It is estimated that over 70% of elementary schools in the United States are using some type of RTI model to identify at-risk students and assist them in catching up with their same-grade peers (Sparks, 2015). The majority of states offer financial support for districts that wish to implement districtwide RTI models (SEDL, 2008). On the other hand, clear procedures from the state and federal government on how to implement RTI models have been slow to reach the district and school levels (Samuels, 2016; Sansosti & Noltemeyer, 2008). In fact, the most recent reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act—also called the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)—only mentions broad guidelines for tiered support systems in its advisement to districts and schools regarding support for student success. Its advisement to schools states that the schoolwide program plan must be

developed with the involvement of parents and other members of the community to be served and individuals who will carry out such plan, including teachers, principals, other school leaders, paraprofessionals present in the school, administrators, the (district), . . . and, if appropriate, specialized instructional support personnel, technical assistance providers, school staff, (and) . . . if the plan relates to a secondary school, students and other individuals determined by the school. (ESSA, 2015)

Clearly, collaborative and interdisciplinary leadership teams are critical to the consistency and success of RTI models. School and district leadership is another key factor in the successful implementation of comprehensive school reforms like MTSS and RTI (Dulaney, 2012). However, RTI also demands that leaders understand both the technical features and the adaptive changes required for RTI models to be successful at the secondary level (Mellard, Prewett, & Deshler, 2012).

This chapter outlines some of the challenges to implementing MTSS and RTI models in secondary schools and explores how site interdisciplinary leadership teams can assist in the implementation of successful RTI/MTSS models in their schools.

BACKGROUND

What Is RTI?

RTI focuses on students who are struggling in school and provides the structures and procedures to implement interventions designed to prevent these individuals from academic failure or from being referred for special education services. RTI requires that interdisciplinary teams meet regularly for the purpose of designing and implementing educational and/or behavioral interventions to get students back on track and achieving at the same rate and level as their peers.